

Historian pitches bold vision for historic armoury



By Brock Weir

The Aurora Armoury on the northeast corner of Town Park has a storied place in the Town's history, but has the potential to be a community hub long into the future, according to local historian Christopher Watts.

Town Park, the green space in the heart of Downtown Aurora, celebrates its 150th Anniversary this year, and if Mr. Watts' and the Aurora Heritage Authority (AHA) gets its way, the anniversary, through the adaptive reuse of the armoury, will open a significant new chapter for the community hub.

Last month, Council approved moving forward with the repurposing of the Armoury, part of a greater decision which included the demolition of the former homes of the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre on Victoria Street.

Ahead of Council's decision, local lawmakers were presented with the AHA's elaborate vision by Mr. Watts, dubbed 'The Aurora Farmoury.'

'One of the things that is lost when we get into the Cultural Precinct Plan is effectively there is no innovative design elements, no integrated land use, and really no engaging programming or anything to serve as a creative hub,' said Mr. Watts. 'Those repurposed pieces really don't speak to anything that is going to set Aurora apart.'

What he proposed is an 'empowerment centre' which might seem to some to be another Farmers' Market, at least on the surface, but has just about as many layers as an onion. Their proposal was based on four principles: education, community, exchange and sustainability.

Beginning with 'exchange,' Mr. Watts said the existing market needs a greater presence, centering the Market on the armoury to provide an all-season market.

'One of the things that is an easy victory is that shelter space,' said Mr. Watts. 'It provides everything from current stability, a consistency and provides all of those things an indoor market doesn't really do. [It also] lends itself to an evening market. A Farmers' Market is great on Saturdays, but if you don't make it, you don't make it. If we take the evening approach and also layer in an Wednesday or Thursday night market into that space, you have vitality but you are also allowing people to come in midweek and pick up stuff they weren't able to get.'

This, he said, tied in nicely with continued calls for a grocery store 'or something along those lines' in Aurora's Downtown Core, which were voiced several times at a public information session held in December by Councillors Tom Mrakas and Michael Thompson, just days before Council's final decision on Library Square.

An all-season expanded market is just one of the ways Mr. Watts says the Armoury can reach maximum potential for Aurora and its citizens. Additional components proposed include a full industrial teaching kitchen to provide education and rental opportunities, kitchen and seed libraries, day camps focused on the educational power of food and farming, a pop-up cinema, a place for Aurorans to trade their goods with others, and even a 'Hall of Farm' which pays tribute to the farms and farmers of Aurora's past, as well as its agricultural milestones.

Although some Council members expressed concern that the components as a whole might be too much for a comparatively small space, the presentation included schedules and layouts on how everything can be accommodated.

Although the reuse of the Armoury will be a study that will happen further into 2017, the 'Farmoury' is a concept that caught Council's attention 'with Councillor Sandra Humfries describing it as 'visionary.'

'We have been wondering what to do and where to go [with that building] and you have provided such incredible ideas,' she said. 'I

think there is a great opportunity to see some of this come to fruition.?

Added Councillor John Abel: ?There is lots to work in that space. I know when we purchased the armoury, it was meant to be part of the park and it belongs to the public. It is a matter of coming together and engaging the community. I am all for engaging and moving forward for a public domain to do public things.?

In the end, if Council adopts the ?Farmoury? concept, the Armoury would be a hub for what Mr. Watts estimates a total of 64 hours a week with evening programming happening every day.

?If you go to the Market you're going to get a six hour window versus 64,? says Mr. Watts. ?It is overlapping [programs] for maximum revenue generation that comes out of the repurposing study. Your opportunities are vast to be able to leverage what you have. Let's utilize some of the canvas we already have. Let's do some creative, eye-catching things.?